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Inscriptions on ceramics of medieval city Aktobe

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Abstract

This article will address pottery inscriptions found in an archaeological city of Aktobe, located at the middle reaches of the river Chu. Many inscriptions found on ceramics, dating to the IX-XI centuries, were found some rooms of a dwelling excavated in 2008 in the Shakhristan section of the medieval city (35 m X 10 m excavation block). The inscriptions were found on vessel bodies, necks, bases, or handles. In spite of the fact that inscriptions are often written vertically or horizontally, they are very similar. Our analysis demonstrates different styles and chronological periods for the inscribed ceramic vessels. Descriptions, photographs, and drawings of the inscribed vessels are presented here.

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1. Introduction

Each year the archaeological research on medieval cities expands covering new areas. As a result of detailed research we now have rich data. These impressive discoveries and artifact finds have changed many of our former ideas about the medieval cities of Kazakhstan. These excavations and researches have provided a rich, integral part of the history of Kazakhstan. Of the many cities with rich archaeological material is the medieval city of Aktobe.

The medieval city of Aktobe is located near the River Chu, in a place where nomadic steppe tradition meets settled agrarian life.

2. Architectural style

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The city plan is linear in configuration and covers a large territory. Aktobe has been studied carefully since 1974. The complicated stratigraphy at the site indicates the existence of overlapping cultures, dating from the VI – early XIII centuries. The ceramic collections consist mostly of table wares.

The inscriptions on the ceramics are found on the necks, bodies, handles, and rims of the vessels in combination with incised and stamped decorations. Inscribed ceramics are found from all stratigraphic levels of the city site.

The ceramic inscriptions described in this article come from the 2008 excavations. The excavation block is 35 m X 10 m in the shakhristan section, east of the citadel. The excavations uncovered a thick outer wall of the citadel and several rooms of houses (The scientific report on archaeological... 2009).

Ten rooms were excavated, showing earthen constructions with a hallway (corridor?). The main part of the wall construction of the hall was clearly defined, but the doors into the entrance-way had been destroyed. Some rooms had a preserved sufa. During the excavation of the floors, a layer of earth was found connected to the walls of the hallway, at a of about 35-40 cm.

Most of the building has been repaired, including the walls. The interior was also remodeled. During our excavations, overall building appeared to have been remodeled. Topsoil mixed with the mud bricks? were found at a depth of 0.5-0.6 m from the ground. The re-modeled floors appeared to be slightly elevated. Therefore, the interior of the building also had exposed patches of outer construction features.

The pottery with inscriptions have for the most part been found in the south-east part of the excavation. The inscriptions have been placed on the shoulder of the pot, the jar neck, or on the body, or the vessel base. The drawing techniques are similar in most pieces, however the type of differences in writing and lettering was different. Some inscriptions appear to be vertical while others are written horizontally. Although the inscriptions on pottery have not been deciphered, we are still able to separate them into different types and to describe the inscriptions.

3. Artwork

The two rows of inscription a neck jar fragment was fashioned by a single instrument (Figure 1-1). Also had three strokes or sequences of letters, that were connected to each other in the form of a "T". The dish fragment is 17 cm to 14 cm in height, the wall thickness 0.8 cm, and the width was 9 cm. The exterior vessel appeared to be a brownish-red ware was covered with a light yellow slip. The vessel is fashioned of clay with sand inclusions and has been evenly fired.

The wall of a whole jar was inscribed by a single tool (Figure 1-2). The inscription was written on the front of the vessel, with the handle facing the side. This inscription is exactly like the previous inscription discussed before. These two inscribed words found in Figure 1-1 and 1-2 have the same meaning. Also these two dishes were found close to one another. The height of the vessel is 16.5 cm, the rim diameter is 9 cm, and the bottom diameter is 8.4 cm. The handle has been broken. These dark brown-red dishes have been made clay mixed with fine sand inclusions and fired evenly.

The writing on the body fragment of a Tagore was inscribed using a sharp tool (Figure 1-3). The diameter of opening of the vessel is 24 cm and and its width is 17 cm with a wall thickness 0.8-1.1 cm. This vessel was also made of clay with sand inclusions. The sides and bottom of the pot were made separately and in the finishing stages were then connected together. The connection of these two pieces are immediately noticeable because the bottom of the vessel was formed differently. This method of pot construction is typical for many Tagore found at the settlement of Aktobe. The interior of the vessel is made of a red-brown ware, covered with a dark brown slip and the outside is covered with light yellow slip. This vessel has been evenly fired.

The inscription on the neck of the jar was drawn with a sharp tool (Figure 1-4). Apparently all that remains is a small fragment of the complete text. The fragment measures 11 cm in height and 10 cm in diameter with a wall

thickness of 0.6-0.9 cm. This pot was made of clay with sand inclusions and was fired evenly. The exterior of this red-brown ware was covered with a light yellow slip.

The inscription on the fragment of the cauldron was inscribed in a horizontal script using a sharp tool (Figure 1-5). Like the previously described vessel, the diameter of this cauldron is 16 cm, and the wall thickness is 1-1.6 cm appearance. This vessel was severely burned by fire, although when it was evenly fired and crafted from clay with sand inclusions.

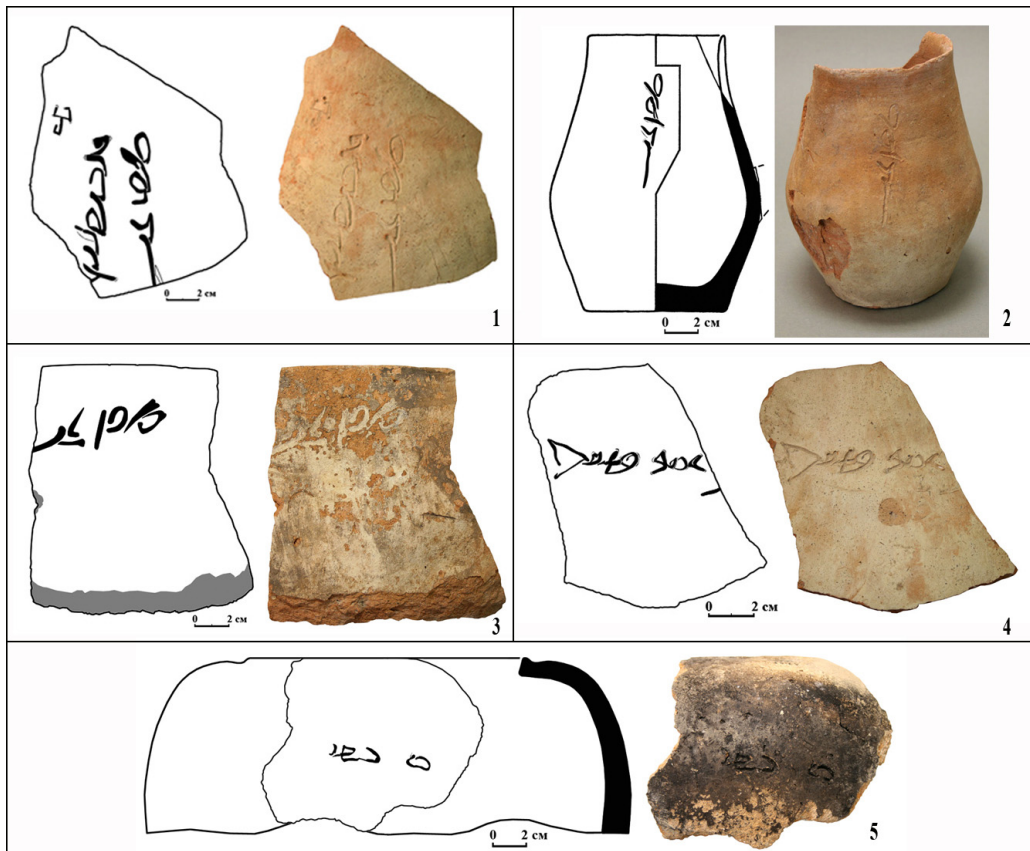


Figure 1. 1. Inscription on the shoulder of the pot; 2. Inscriptions on the side of the pot; 3. Inscription on the side of the fragment of the tagore; 4. Inscription on the mouth of the jug; 5. Inscription on the side of the cauldron.

The majority of these inscribed ceramics were found during the excavations of 2008. Some of them have been deciphered and others not.

The section of the interior length of the city in the eastern part of the citadel was excavated in 1979. On a handle of a jug, found in a layer of excavation of a wall segment (4.5 m in thickness, 1.3 m in height) the inscription (Figure 2-1) was written. The height of the jug is 33 cm, diameter of is the rim is 22 cm, the height of a mouth is 7 cm, and the diameter of a bottom is 13 cm.

In the following years, a big tagore (vessel) with an inscription on the side (Figure 2-2) and other pottery fragments with three line inscriptions were discovered (Figure 2-3). On the side of the tagore a name of the person was written (Shalekenov U.KH., Aldabergenov N.O. 2006).

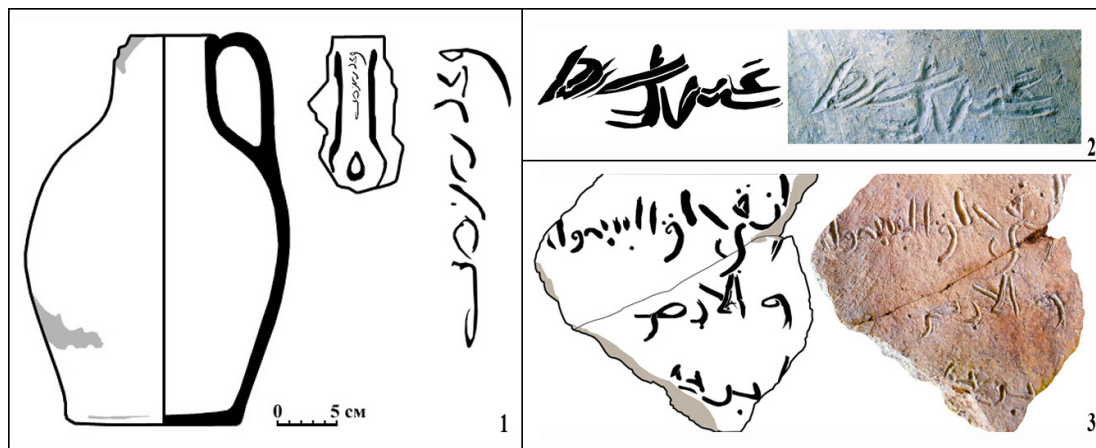


Figure 2. 1. Inscription on the handle of the jug; 2. Inscription on the side of the tagore; 3. Inscription on the fragment of the table ware.

In 1989, along the western section of Aksu reservoir, archaeologists found fragments of huge khoum (vessel bigger than tagore) consisting of five rim fragments with a circular inscription on the flat interior edge. This inscription has been identified as Sogdian language. V.A. Livshits studied this inscription which consists of 40-50 letters (Shalekenov U.KH. 2006). that the inscription says that this khoum (large vessel) was presented to the Soghdian citizen Hudtaka. However, there is no mention of Hudtaka's degree or rank. This inscription on vessel's rim dates to 776/777 or 812/813 (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The remains of the pot with a Sogdian inscription on the aureole, found in 1989 year. (Shalekenov U.KH., Aldabergenov N. O. (2006). Medieval Aktobe. Album. Ankara. p. 26)

In this area as Turkic and Uigur writings became widespread, they still did not completely replace Sogdian writings and script. The Turkic and Uighur writings only replaced a small segment of the original Sogdian writings. Soghdian writing continued to be used in the IX–X centuries, before the spread of the Arabic script in Zhetysu. In Zhetysu, there were a few ceramic wares discovered with similar rim inscriptions. A.N. Bernshtam

found a huge khoulm (vessel) with the inscription on the interior of the vessel rim at the ancient settlement Krasnorechinsk and Novopokrovsk in 1941. In 1988 V.D. Goryacheva found such inscriptions at the excavations at the ancient settlement Krasnorechinsk. And in 1996, a chance finds also included a khoulm with Sogdian inscriptions on the interior rim. In 1998 G.L. Semenov discovered a khoulm with an inscription on vessel rim at the ancient settlement of Akbeshim (Goryacheva V.D. 2010). Also there are examples of such writings found on pottery from A.N. Bernshtam's survey of the Chu River Valley (Proceedings Semirechensk... 1950).

A.N. Bernshtam stated that the Sogdian culture first arrived and spread throughout the Zhetysay valleys in V–VIII centuries (Proceedings Semirechensk... 1950). Others also suggested that Sogdians continued to exist in next century. V.I. Raspopova, who explored the settlement of Akbeshim in 1953-1954, assumed that the Sogdians began arriving in the Chu Valley in VII century and certainly by the VIII century. Since the end of the VIII century, but before the X century, the influence of the Sogdians in these valleys was greatly weakened (Raspopova V.I. 1960).

The distinguished scholar Mahmood Kashkari, who researched and left written records of the language, geography, history and traditions of Turks in XI century says: "The people speak Balasaguna Sogdian and Turkic languages, as well as the population of Taraz and Bajza" (Kashkari M. 1993). The Turks and Sogdians continued to have relations with the medieval towns of the Chu valley. However, in spite of the fact that A.N. Bernshtam and V.I. Raspopova describe the arrival of the Sogdians in Zhetysay valleys at the V–VIII centuries and their departure by the X century, V.A. Levshchits classifies the inscriptions on the neck and body of ceramic vessels to the IX–XI centuries (Levshchits V.A. 1981). Therefore, it seems apparent that although the Sogdians no longer were present in the Chu Valley at this time, Sogdian writing and inscriptions continued to be widespread during IX–XI centuries. And also, all of the ceramic fragments described in this article have been found in the uppermost stratigraphic levels of the settlement of Aktobe. More generally speaking, the forms and styles of these ceramic vessels date to the IX–XI centuries.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion it is now possible to demonstrate how important such inscriptions found on pottery may be for archaeological researches at the medieval cities of Kazakhstan. These inscriptions can be used to establish the dating and chronology of the cities as well as the ethnic influences within the cities as well as continued trade relations. Also archaeologists may begin to explore the importance of writing during these time periods and the question of what these inscriptions might have meant for the cultures or ethnic groups of these cities.

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